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# Iraq: Ethnic and Religious Mosaic [REDACTED]

*A Research Paper*

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[REDACTED]

January 1991  
[REDACTED]

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# **Iraq: Ethnic and Religious Mosaic** [REDACTED]

*A Research Paper*

*Information available as of 15 December 1990  
was used in this report.*



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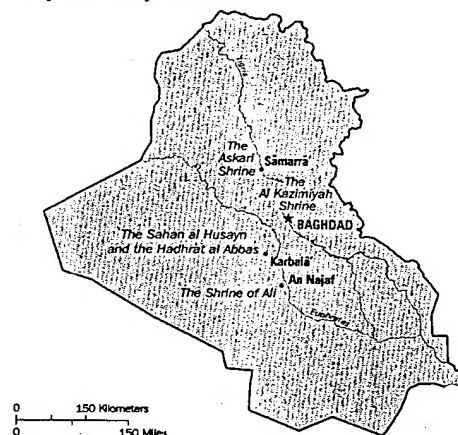
# IRAQ

## Shia Holy Places



The Shrine of

### Iraq: Shia Holy Places



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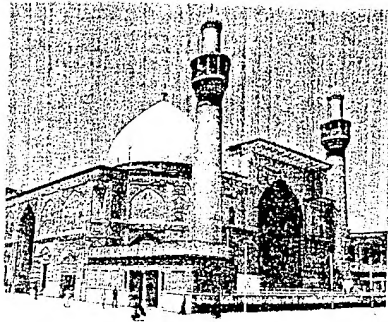
### Pilgrimages to the Shia Shrines

Pilgrimages—ziyarat—to Iraq's holy sites are not obligatory for the world's Shias, as is the hajj to Mecca. For political reasons, Iranians, Lebanese, and Syrians have rarely traveled to Iraq in recent years, although they once did so in great numbers. Before Baghdad's invasion of Kuwait, pilgrims came principally from Iraq itself as well as from Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia.

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Pilgrimages peak during the first 10 days of the Islamic month of Moharram—next to occur from

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The Shrine of Ali (C)

### a Holy Places in Iraq

major mosques in Mecca, Medina, and —which are held in esteem by all Islamic a Islam's five holiest shrines are in central e holy places are tombs of seventh-, eighth-, century Imams who were central figures in ears of Shiism. Today, the holy men who ritual leaders of the mosques associated shrines have religious authority among nd the world.

se holy sites are located within a few of important military or industrial facility damage to the centuries-old structures result from hostilities during the current d probably spark militant Shia reactions. t accidental damage could inspire the

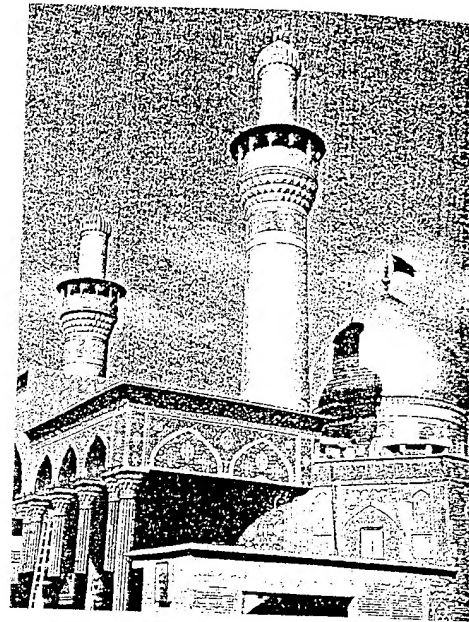
une 1991. On Ashura—the 10th day—memorate the martyrdom of the third sayn, by enacting passion plays and by g themselves with chains and swords to emselves of any guilt for abandoning While on ziyarat, believers also acquire a piece of holy turf; whenever Shias kneel o touch their heads to the ground in y use the turba to avoid making contact isecrated ground. Pious Shias are bur-eteries adjoining the holy places in Iraq o secure the protection of saints. Today, f graves—in some cases arranged in ed catacombs—ring the holy places.

shrines' spiritual leaders to call for a militant response.

### The Shrine of Ali at An Najaf

Ali—cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad and the first Shia Imam—reportedly is buried in An Najaf. Although a shrine has been present there since the eighth century, the current structure probably dates from the revival of Persian influence in Ottoman times. The large dome is gilded, while gold plating covers the minarets from the top to just above the ground. Non-Muslims may not enter the two-story sanctuary that encloses the tomb and is housed within the mosque. The town of An Najaf, which was established around the shrine in the 10th century as a focus for pilgrimage, is also the most important place for religious education among Shias.

An Najaf has long been a hub of organized resistance against the central authority in Baghdad. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, locals refused conscription in service to the Ottomans; rebellion against the Turks' iron-fisted control of the holy sites erupted during 1915-16 and resulted in damage to the shrines. An Najaf was also a seedbed for anti-British activity in the 1920s and opposition to the Iraqi monarchy during the 1950s. Ayatollah Khomeini spent several years of his exile in the town, and in the early 1970s An Najaf served as a center for organized Shia opposition to the regime in Baghdad.

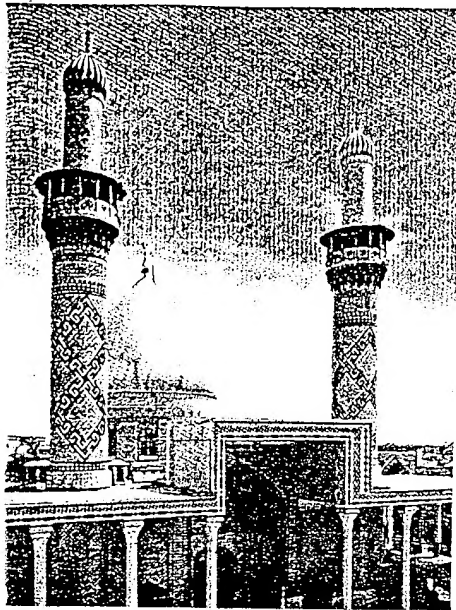


The Sahan al Husayn.

### The Sahan al Husayn and the Hadhrat al Abbas in Karbala'

These two shrines, the burial sites for Husayn, Ali's warrior son and the third Imam, and Husayn's half brother Abbas, make Karbala' the holiest site for Shias in Iraq. The shrines occupy opposite ends of the old city—Husayn's to the west and Abbas's to the





Hadhrat al Abbas.

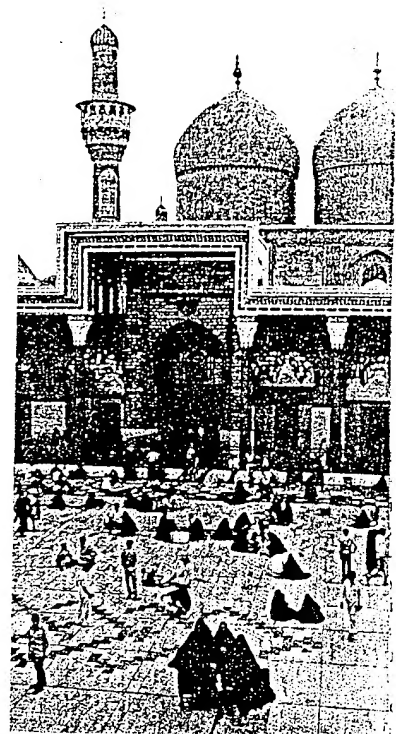
t. The gilded dome atop Husayn's shrine is flanked  
two minarets, and a seven-gated wall encloses a  
rtyard that surrounds the sanctuary. Abbas's less  
ntentious shrine features a glazed-brick dome and  
ed minarets.

Karbala' is also a center for pilgrimage and is most significant as the site of the seventh-century battle that pitted Husayn and his followers against mainstream Muslims. This battle of Karbala'—in which both Husayn and Abbas died—culminated the schism that split Islam into Sunni and Shia sects over the issue of succession to Muhammad. Today, numerous historical sites related to the battle are preserved inside the old walls of the city. Like those of An Najaf, Karbala's religious leaders played a significant role in organizing rebellion in the 1920s, 1950s, and 1970s.

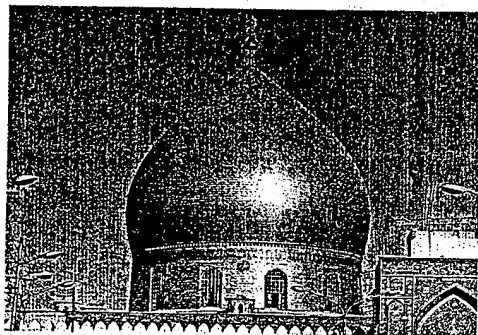
#### The Al Kazimiyah Shrine

The seventh and ninth Shia Imams—Musa al Kazim and his grandson Muhammad Al-Janad—are buried in an enshrined area within the Kazimiyah mosque, which dates to 1515. The faithful may enter the courtyard that surrounds the double-domed mosque through any of seven gates; non-Muslims may not enter. Both of the mosque's major domes and its four minarets are gilded. The tombs themselves are situated within silver cages, one of which is beneath each dome.

Over the course of the postrevolutionary period the mosque and its town have been subsumed into metropolitan Baghdad. Today, dense patterns of residential and governmental buildings surround the shrine.



The Al Kazimiyah Shrine.



*The Askari Shrine.*

#### **The Askari Shrine at Samarra'**

The 10th and 11th Imams—Ali al Hadi and his son Hassan al Askari—are buried in a tiled-dome mosque of Persian design in Samarra'. A smaller, gilded dome marks the site of the crevice into which the 12th Imam, Muhammad, fell to his death; Shias expect that this Imam will reappear here to establish the true faith on Earth. The best surviving example of a Babylonian ziggurat stands just north of the town and is an important symbol of Iraqi heritage. A flood-control dam and a small hydroelectric power plant also lie within 1 kilometer north of the Samarra' shrine

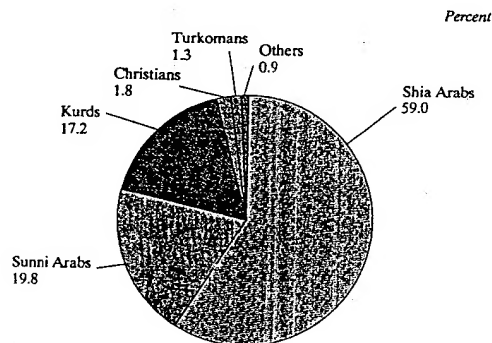
# IRAQ

## Ethnic and Religious Mosaic

### Introduction

Iraq's population is strikingly heterogeneous. Although almost 80 percent of Iraqis speak Arabic and more than 95 percent are Muslim, sectarian, ethnic, tribal, and denominational differences abound. The ethnic and religious geography of the country reflects this heterogeneity. Shia Arabs, who constitute a majority of the population, reside mainly in the southeast, while Sunni Arabs inhabit the area north and west of Baghdad. Between these two regions and in the capital itself, Arabs of both sects are intermixed. A fiercely independent Kurdish minority lives in the rugged hills of the northeast; separating this territory from the Sunni Arab area are small pockets of Christians, Turkomans, and other minorities.

### Iraq: Ethnoreligious Composition<sup>a</sup>



<sup>a</sup> Includes foreign worker population.



Sunni Arab woman works at a Baghdad construction.



### Sunni Arabs

If migrant Arab workers are excluded, Sunni Arabs comprise only 12 percent of the country's population but dominate the top levels of the government and the military. Indeed, Sunni Arabs have ruled the country

Iraq's 95,000 Bedouin, however, the traditional functions of tribal organization and the associated power of the shaykhs were already eroding for most Iraqi Arabs when the monarchy was overthrown in 1958; since then they have virtually disappeared. Nevertheless, many Middle East researchers believe the prolonged absence of alternative social links has helped to preserve tribal loyalties in individual and group relations.

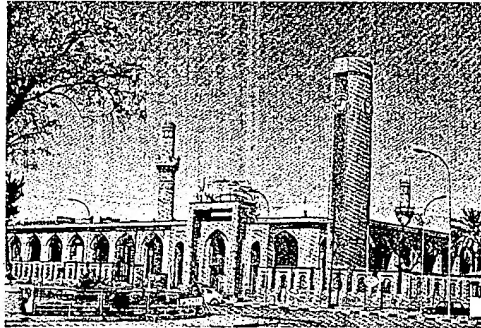
Because President Saddam Husayn and his family are of the Tikriti clan, this group is the preeminent Sunni Arab clan in Iraq today.<sup>1</sup> Saddam was born in a village near Tikrit and has drawn on the town—located about 150 kilometers northwest of Baghdad and populated by about 100,000 persons—and surrounding communities for leaders in the armed forces.



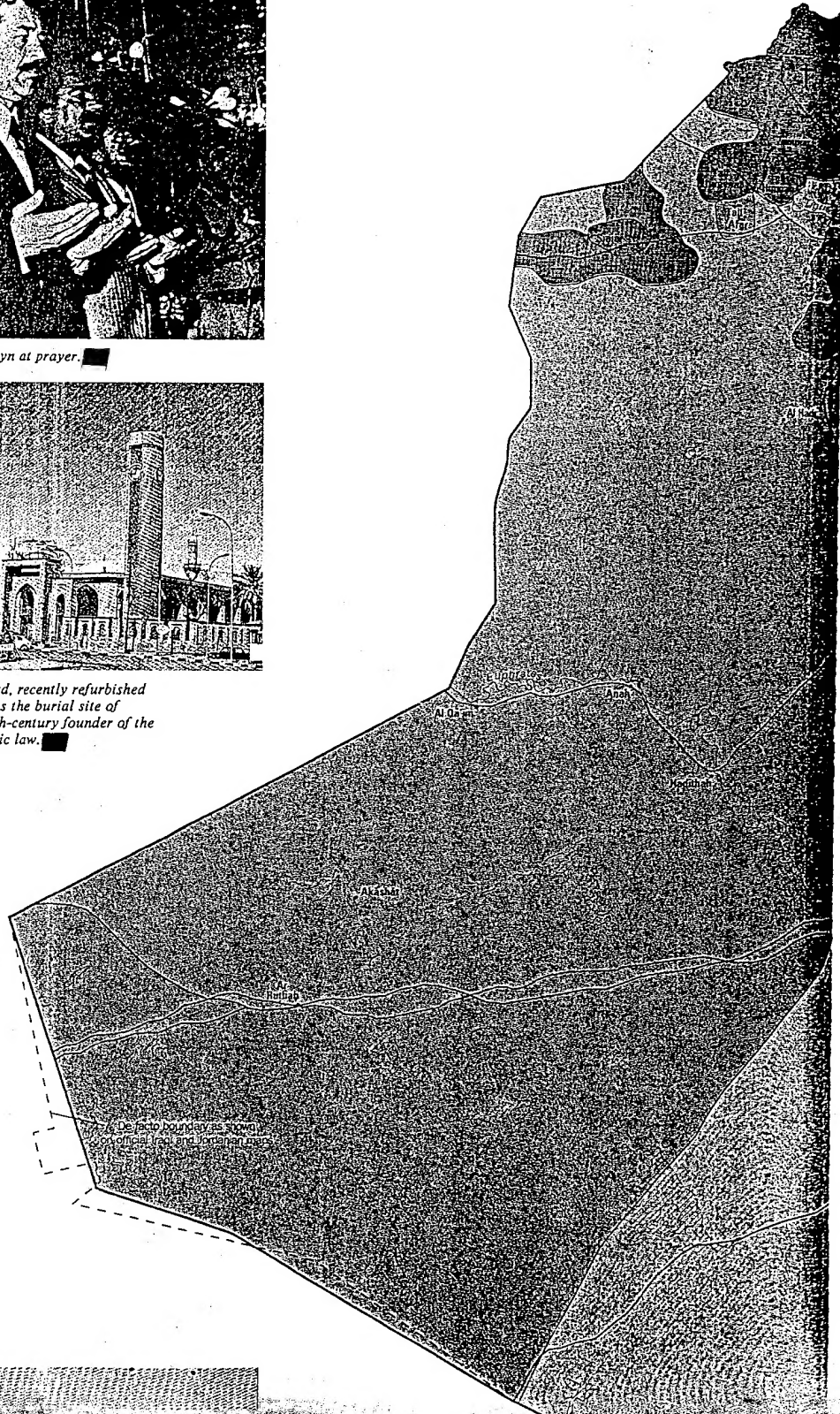
side by side with men  
site.



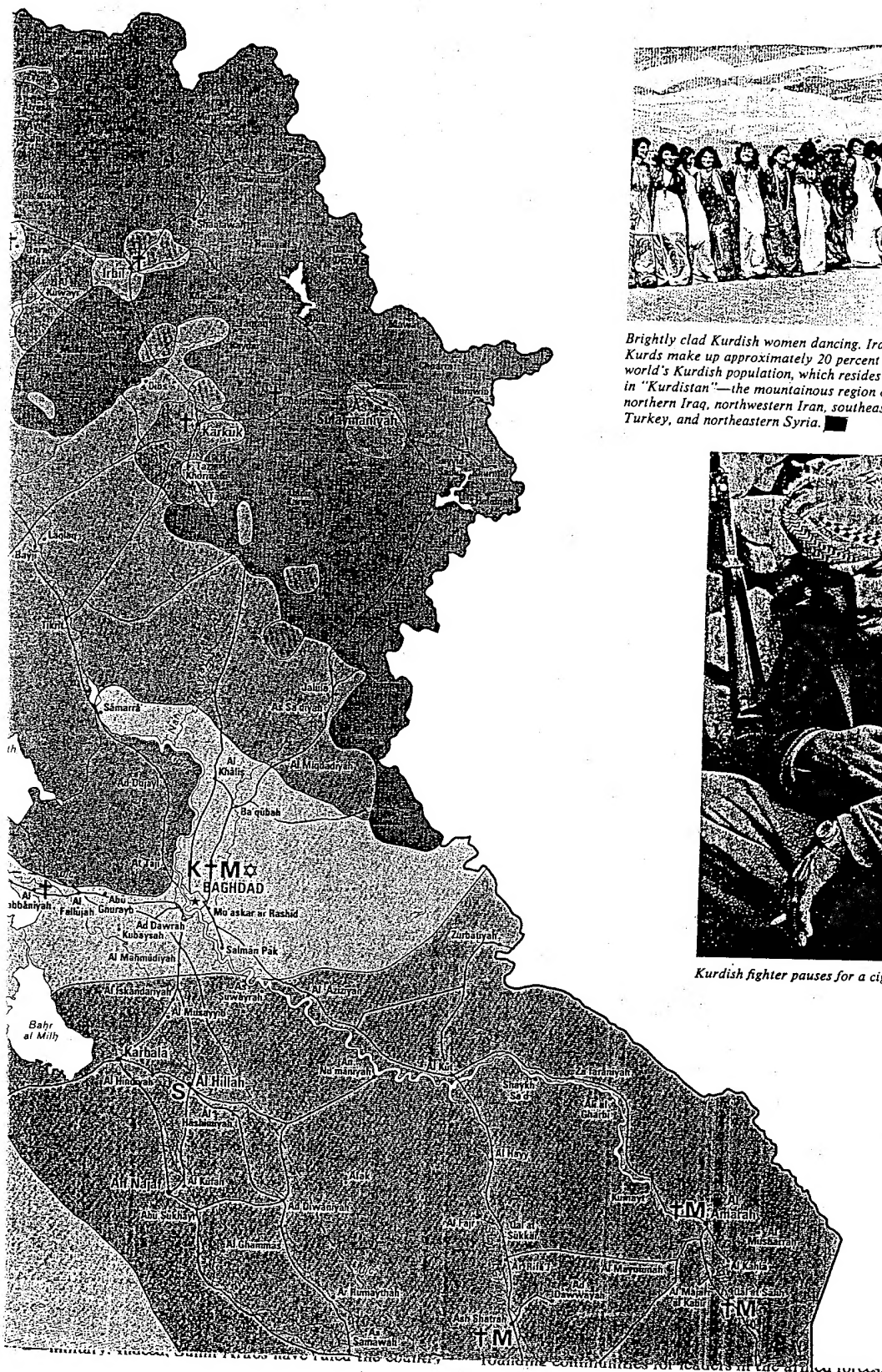
President Saddam Husayn at prayer.



Sunni mosque in Baghdad, recently refurbished by the government, marks the burial site of Imam Abu Hanifa, eighth-century founder of the Hanafite school of Islamic law.







Brightly clad Kurdish women dancing. Iraqi Kurds make up approximately 20 percent of the world's Kurdish population, which resides chiefly in "Kurdistan"—the mountainous region of northern Iraq, northwestern Iran, southeastern Turkey, and northeastern Syria. ■



Kurdish rebels near the border, 1988. Iraqi use of chemical Iranian forces and Kurdish heavy civilian casualties in



Kurdish fighter pauses for a cigarette, 1979. ■

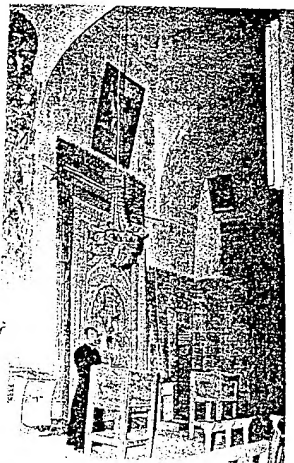


Chaldean priest in Mosul's Peter, which dates to the 12th century.





men of Halabjah, early  
weapons against  
rebels here caused  
March 1988.



Church of Simon  
3th century.



majority of Ba'th Party leadership posts before the Ba'th's short-lived coup of 1963, Sunnis have controlled a strengthened Ba'th Party since it seized power in 1968.

Like most other ethnic groups in the country, Sunni Arabs have historic tribal affiliations. Except for

#### Islam's Roots of Division

Traditional rivalry between Sunnis—who make up some 90 percent of the world's 980 million Muslims—and Shias is rooted in the centuries-old political and religious dispute within Islam. In the seventh century, a minority of Muslims split from the majority over the selection of a caliph, or successor, to the Prophet Muhammad. A minority group, which became the Shias, held that succession should pass by divine right through Imams who were the descendants of Muhammad, his son-in-law Ali, and his grandson Husayn. The Sunni majority instead believed that successor caliphs should be elected on the basis of their political and military strength. Over time, the Shias evolved into a religious sect, alienated from Sunni society and possessing a strong sense of cohesion based on a common bond of oppression and injustice. The Shias themselves splintered into subjects, disagreeing over the number of Imams who rightfully succeeded the Prophet. Iraqi and Iranian Shias—who together account for 65 percent of the world's Shias—are of the Twelver subject, believing in the valid claims of 12 Imams.

the country's intelligence organs, and his own personal security staff. The regime has provided Tikrit with considerable funds for economic development projects and, in recent years, has located an Air Force base and academy, an armored training center, and an Army camp in and around the town.

Iraqis use the term "Tikriti" variously to apply to Saddam's extended family and to the residents and tribesmen of Tikrit and nearby villages. In anthropological terms, the Tikritis are not a tribe themselves but part of the al-Bikat section of the Abu Nasir tribe.

#### Shia Arabs

Making up almost 60 percent of the population, Shia Arabs have long been politically disenfranchised and economically disadvantaged in Iraq. When the British

Shia women exit the Al Ka Baghdad.



One of several Armenian churches in Iraq. Unlike Christians in Arab countries, Christians in Iraq are relatively recent arrivals. Most are Assyrians or Armenians who fled from Turkey, mainly in the 20th century.

#### Iraq: Ethnic and Religious Population \*

Thousands

	Religious Group				Total
	Shia Muslim	Sunni Muslim	Christian	Other	
Total	11,115	7,065	342	163	18,685
Ethnic group					
Arab	11,025	2,320	115		13,460
Kurd	5	3,200			3,205
Assyrian			200		200
Turkoman	80	160			240
Other			25 <sup>b</sup>	130 <sup>c</sup>	155
Foreign workers	5	1,385	2	33	1,425

\* Estimates as of 1 November 1990 based on available sources. Recent Iraqi censuses have not registered ethnic groups, and the 1965 census was the last one to record religious affiliation.

<sup>b</sup> Mainly Armenian.

<sup>c</sup> Mainly Yazidi and Mandaeen.

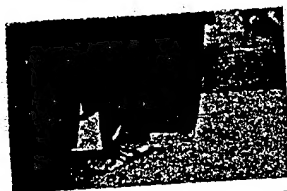
took over the government from the Shias for the most part were less and politically weaker than the Sunnis, though Shias made considerable finance, and education after independence, virtually excluded from the government's military leadership.

The pattern of Sunni domination is still present. Even though most Iraqis live in Baghdad's oil wealth during the 1990s, the Shia south is considerably poorer than the Sunni-controlled part of the country. Shias are underrepresented in the government, holding only three of the 23 ministerial posts in Iraq's 250-member Assembly.

In addition, Shia towns near the border of Iraq's civilian destruction from

Saddam's efforts to defuse Shia discontent by trying to accommodate their demands, enhancing the regime's popularity and lessening the effects of an Ir-

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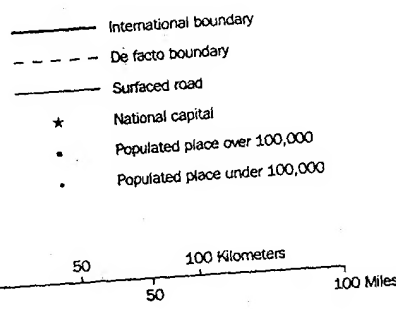
Zimiyah Shrine in



Churches in Baghdad. Countries such as Lebanon, most Iraqi refugees arrived; 80 percent whose ancestors in the early part of this



Members of the unique Shia tribe, the swamp-dwelling Ma'dan. This group continues to reside in reed houses in the south despite major disruptions caused by fighting in their home area during the Iran-Iraq war.



## Ethnoreligious Groups

	Majority	Minority concentration
Shia Arab	■	
Shia Arab / Sunni Arab	■	
Sunni Arab	■	S
Sunni Arab / Kurd	■	
Kurd	■	K
Turkoman	■	
Christian	■	†
Yezidi	■	
Mandaean	■	M
Jewish	■	☆

the Ottomans in 1920, educated, poorer, Sunni minority. Although progress in trade, independence, they were dependent and from

has continued to the benefited from 1970s

east remained concentrated north-central, currently holding posts and 23 member National, of the fighting comprising about the front and suffered 375,000 casualties, front suffered most in the war. (S NF)

discontent have fostered Shia religious sensibilities, religious credentials, Iranian-style Islamic

revival among Iraq's Shias. Among other measures, the government has refurbished the Shia holy cities of An Najaf and Karbala' and allowed the resumption of Shia self-flagellation during the holiest Shia celebration, Ashura. In a shift away from secular Ba'thism, Saddam has also dramatically proclaimed his own religiosity, notably by declaring himself to be a descendant of Muhammad.

Baghdad's brutal repression has probably crushed most Shia opposition inside Iraq and inhibited Shia civil unrest. The Army quashed demonstrations by thousands of Shias in An Najaf and Karbala' in February 1977, following the government's attempt to ban self-flagellation and halt a religious procession. The Army also quelled riots in 1979 sparked by the regime's refusal to allow a Shia delegation to go to Iran to congratulate Ayatollah Khomeini on the Iranian revolution. Moreover, in 1980 Baghdad forcibly deported more than 60,000 Shias of Iranian origin to Iran and murdered Shia clerics—and their family members—prominent in the opposition.

## Kurds

Kurds make up slightly more than 17 percent of Iraq's population but are the least assimilated of its major ethnic groups. Predominantly Sunni Muslim, the Kurds are set apart from the Arab majority by their language—a non-Semitic tongue closely akin to Persian—their still strong tribal ties, their concentration in the mountainous terrain of the north, and their perception of themselves as part of a stateless nation with its population concentrated in the border areas of Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. Most Iraqi Kurds have long opposed the central government, in which only a few Kurds serve as figureheads.

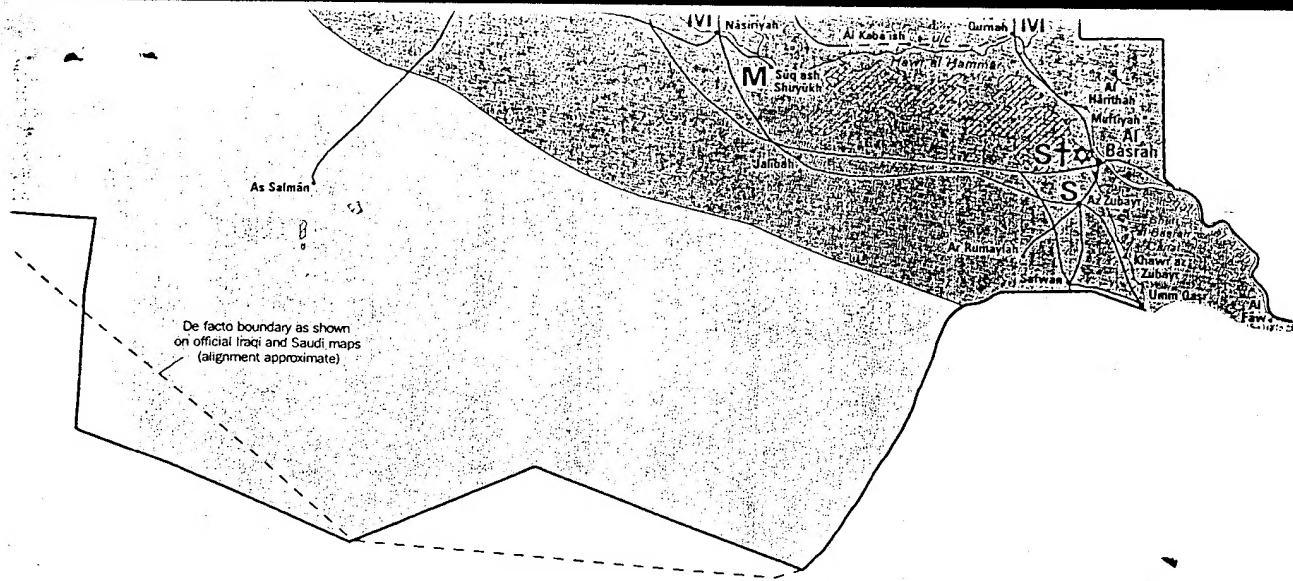
Since 1920, when British mandate policy incorporated part of the Kurdish tribal lands within Iraq's boundaries, the Kurdish desire for independence has periodically erupted in armed revolt. Despite having obtained symbolic self-rule in 1970 when the fledgling Ba'thist government created the Kurdish Autonomous Region, Kurdish rebels launched a full-scale revolt in 1974 that threatened the regime and produced an estimated

60,000 casualties. year, however, exchange for conc Iraq. After a period rebels took advantage of the front during the of mountainous as they launched free efforts were supported more significantly tary operations with lines.

In 1988 Iraq undertook against Kurdish comfort to the chemical weapons

The government's 600 kilometer-wide border with Iran and Turkey prevent cross-border the rebels' local





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revolt collapsed the following  
an withdrew its support in  
is on the contested border with  
relative quiescence, Kurdish  
of Iraqi troop deployments to  
with Iran and seized control  
a northern Iraq, from which  
guerrilla operations. These  
to some extent by Syria and  
an, which mounted joint mili-  
Iraqi Kurds behind Iraqi front-

1990 Baghdad, apparently confident of the effective-  
ness of its pacification efforts, began to relax security  
in some areas of Kurdistan and allowed some Kurds  
to return temporarily to farm their former lands. The  
government also moved to compensate relocated  
Kurds with land and money.

#### Other Ethnic and Religious Groups

Numbering about 340,000, Christians—chiefly of the  
Assyrian Catholic (Chaldean), Assyrian Orthodox,  
Syrian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic, and Armenian  
Orthodox sects—comprise the greatest proportion of  
the remainder of Iraq's nonforeign population. Like

Christians in much of the Middle East, Iraqi Chris-  
tians are generally more Westernized, better educat-  
ed, and more urbanized than their Muslim country-  
men. They have also found an ideological home in  
Ba'thism's secular political philosophy and see the  
Ba'th Party as a protector against Islamic fundamen-  
talism. For its part, the government has recruited  
Christians into its ranks—Foreign Minister Tariq  
Aziz is a Chaldean—and treats Christians as well as  
it does Sunni Muslims.

Only the Assyrian Orthodox, who re-  
belled against the government in the 1930s, still resist  
assimilation somewhat. A small minority continues to  
call for an independent Assyrian homeland.

The Turkomans, Turkic-speaking Muslims, today  
make up slightly more than 1 percent of Iraq's  
population. Members of this group are relative new-  
comers, having been brought to Iraq by the Ottomans  
in the late 19th century to help repel Kurdish tribal  
raids. Since Iraqi independence, some Turkomans  
have occasionally fought on the side of the Kurds  
against the central government. Despite some success  
in absorbing this ethnic group into the general popula-  
tion, the Saddam regime cannot claim the loyalty of  
all Turkomans; the majority of recent Iraqi Army

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it has also created a 30-  
zone along the border with  
Kurdish-inhabited area to  
rel operations and to remove  
network. By the spring of



from Sinjar. Yazidis practice baptism, drink wine, but do not eat fish, lettuce, beans, or pumpkins. The sect annually make pilgrimage to their founder—a 12th-century man—north of Mosul.



ish the Mandeans. Because of the respect they pay to the forces of Light, the religion's sacred positions.

s reported in Turkey are Turkomans.

ethnic and religious groups are politically important and include:

s. Of Kurdish stock, Iraq's 100,000 Yazidis are a religion that combines elements of at least five major faiths. Neighboring Muslims describe the Yazidis, terming them devil worshippers, as they seek to placate the force of evil.

teans (Sabians or Gnostics). This group numbers less than 30,000 and lives mainly in the south of the larger cities. Their faith is largely based on Mithraism—a third-century Christian heresy—and includes the practice of baptism and astrology.

Although comprising about 3 percent of the population as recently as 1932, most Iraqi Jews fled to Israel in the 1950s, leaving no more than 100 in Iraq today.

Members of the only elderly community claim to be well respected by the current government, as compared to the harsh repression of the previous regime.

### Foreign Workers

Migrant workers from other countries make up over 7 percent of Iraq's population. More than 95 percent of these are Sunni Arabs, chiefly Egyptians and—to a lesser degree—Palestinians. Much of the remainder are South and East Asians. Before the invasion of Kuwait, foreign workers made up about 20 percent of Iraq's work force, most serving as manual or semi-skilled laborers. Since the invasion, however, at least 375,000 foreigners have fled the country and more are seeking to